

NOT THE RIGHTEOUS!

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by Jack Odell

"For I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" Matthew 9:13

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Chapter 9

Art Petznick " . . . and the tongue shall sing . . . " (Isaiah 35:6)

THEY TELL AN OLD STORY, AND NOT A VERY FUNNY ONE, OF a brain surgeon with palsy. Art Petznick's true story is fully as strange and completely true. It's the story of a stammerer who became a preacher. If that sounds like a joke or a miracle, be sure it's no joke. As for miracles, Art Petznick has lived by miracle for some time now.

He was born on a farm in the rich wheat lands of Canada, and until he was eight or nine years old Art's speech was as good as any other little boy's. Then he developed the impediment that was to mark his life.

We're told that stammering is usually caused by emotional problems. Art knows the answer in his own case. His father was an inconsistent and violent man. Art lived in the constant turmoil of a house dominated by his father's unpredictable temper.

The senior Petznick was a "Sunday Christian." He went to church and insisted that his children go with him, but left GOD in the pew and forgot all about Him until seven days later. Little Art heard things like, "**be ye kind, one to another**," and, "**love one another**," but they never carried over into life at home. There his father took over and pushed GOD aside. Church, it seemed, was one thing and life another. Art couldn't see where they had much connection.

He became a smart-alec, rebellious kid. The only proof that he really cared was that clumsy, embarrassing, stammering speech. It was the mark of a boy with nothing solid to rely on.

After high school he stayed on the farm for several years.

During that time his church-attending, Sabbath-observing father taught him to drink.

This was one lesson Art learned readily. But when the boy played ball on Sundays or went to community dances, he was in trouble. His father, who had swallowed the camel of liquor, strained at a gnat. Big as Art was, he was whipped for such scandalous conduct.

Mrs. Petznick bore the load of trying to hold her family together. In the face of her husband's contradictions and violent temper, she acted as a buffer between the man and his children. This divided Art's loyalties and magnified his insecurity.

Things came to a head when Art went to a village dance, got drunk, and wound up in a fight. His father heard of it and was furious.

"What kind of a son do I have? This is a Christian home - and I expect you to remember it!"

"B-bb-but-anyb-body m-might g-gg-get into a . . ."

"Not my son! And I'll see to it from now on!" Art's mother tried to intervene.

"Let's try to be calm about this, shall we?"

"Calm! Calm, you say! When this young hoodlum goes out and gets in drunken brawls - in public!"

"And who taught him to drink?"

"Don't try to change the subject! The boy's a disgrace and you know it. He'll either change his ways, or he can get out!"

"Please - try to be sensible about this and . . ."

"I'll thank you to leave this matter to me!"

He turned back to his son. "Now then, Arthur, what do you have to say for yourself?"

"P-pp-plenty!"

"What kind of talk is that? P-pp-plenty! For the love of Pete, talk like a man. What do you suppose people would think of me if I talked like a teakettle?"

This was one more cruelty than Art could take. He was almost in tears as he replied.

"I know w-what I th-th-think ab-bout y-you! You s-said t-tt - to ch-change m-my w-ways or g-get out. And I'm g-gettin' out! F - for g-gg-good!"

The words were halting, but the resolution was firm. Art crossed the border into the States and headed for Florida. jobs weren't plentiful for a man with a pitiful tongue. He looked for the little odd ones that didn't call for talking. They didn't pay much, and his progress was slow.

It was the early part of the great depression. As that winter set in, jobs became harder and harder to find. In those days we talked about "the great army of the unemployed," and Art Petznick was soon fighting the battle of the breadline. He thumbed his way to Chicago and began drifting on Skid Row. Odd jobs came and went. Sometimes Art had a little money. When that happened, he drank.

He was pouring them down in a speakeasy when a hard looking character struck up a conversation.

"You're too smart a kid to be drinkin' that cheap hootch. Lemme buy you a shot of good liquor."

Art was much too smart to talk when he didn't have to. He just grinned and nodded and grunted his acceptance. The man slammed his palm down on the bar.

"Hey - give my pal here a double shooter of real whiskey. Right off the boat!"

The new bottle actually had a label on it. Art was impressed.

"Just driftin', kid?"

"Yeah."

"Jobs are mighty scarce, ain't they?"

"Yeah."

"You broke?"

"Yeah."

"You don't talk much, do you?"

"Nope."

The barkeep had finished pouring the whiskey. Art's new acquaintance indicated the glass.

"There ya are. Put that down and things'll - look better!"

"Th-thanks."

Art drank quickly.

"You sure don't talk much, do you?"

"Unh-unh."

"I can see that. Then you're probably the man I'm lookin' for. Here, lemme buy another one of those double shots. We got things to talk about."

The man was a gambler. He sold Art on the proposition that they could make good money gambling with suckers. But Art turned out to be the chump. As a gambler he was a failure.

By the time he was twenty-three, he was a member in good standing of the Grant Park hobo fraternity. In those days of mass unemployment, Chicago's park system included a good sized "bum jungle." It was home to Art. He learned to dig up his contribution to the community stew pot or do without. He also learned how to meet the increasing demands of alcoholism with canned heat or anything else that might yield a little jag.

Life in the jungle was too disappointing to face with a clear head. Drinking deadened the pain of owning nothing, belonging to no one, and going nowhere.

Things began moving in Art's life in October of 1931.

One night, he was slumped in an old chair in the back of a pool hall near State and Harrison. The weather had driven him inside to watch a floating dice game. He was wishing he had the nerve to kill himself when the front door burst open.

"The cops! Out the side door! Cops out front!"

In the sudden confusion, two men escaped by the side door. One of them was Art Petznick. He says now that was the first and smallest of a series of miracles.

Safe outside, he shuffled south on State Street. A cold rain soaked him to the skin. His head was down and his hair plastered over his eyes. Someone stuck a wet piece of paper in his hand.

"Here ya are, buddy!"

"Huh?" Art raised his head. "Wh-what ya w-want?"

"Come on in and dry out. You can eat and get a good night's sleep on a real bed. This is the Pacific Garden Mission!"

"W-w-w-well. . . ."

"Go on inside! I have to stay out here for guys like you. But you don't have to drown. Go on in!"

Art did, and miracle number two took place that same night.

"Dad" Taylor was the Mission Superintendent in those days, and he made JESUS CHRIST "come alive" for Art Petznick. He explained the forgiveness of CHRIST in a way that made beautiful sense. And Art became another in the long succession of men who have been given new lives in the old Mission prayer room.

From the very beginning, Art meant business with the Lord. If this thing was real, and he knew it was, then it called for something real on his part, too. Art stayed on at the Mission and attended all the services. Within a few days he knew GOD was calling him into His service. This was a frightening thought, and he hurried to "Dad" Taylor's office.

"D-dd-dad-h-how d-do you know, wh-wh - when GOD c-calls you?"

"Why, you just know, Art. That is one thing you just know! And if you turn Him down, He just disturbs you and closes other doors until you say 'yes'."

"M-maybe I'm wrong ab-about it. C-c-could th-that b-bb-be?"

"He doesn't want 'cooked-up' responses, Art. He'll let you know definitely if He wants you. Beyond a shadow of a doubt!"

Art already knew. But he kept hoping he was mistaken. What possible use could GOD have for a man with a hopeless stammer? Art went through torture every time he stood up to testify at a Mission service. He wanted so much to tell what the Lord had done for him, but his tongue tied itself in knots.

One thing Art could do. He went to a Bible school and signed up for classes. A miracle made that possible, too.

He needed two dollars for a registration fee, but was too shy to borrow it from Mr. Taylor. The night before the money was due, a total stranger walked up to him on the street - and handed him two dollars! That made three little miracles.

The fourth happened the next day. He was registering at the school when the man behind the desk looked up and asked a question.

"Mr. Petznick, do you own a Bible?"

"N-no, sir. I b-bb-borrowed one f-from th - the M-mmission."

"Come this way, please."

He led the way to a private office and handed Art a brand new Scofield Bible.

"Here you are, my friend. The Lord told me to do this!" So Art had his Bible. But he also had his stammer, and the classes were a real torment. To make matters worse, he discovered he was in love. Her name was Ebba, and she was in several of his classes. When graduation drew near in 1937, he made a tremendous, red-faced, halting effort to tell her how he felt.

It was a horrible failure, as he'd known it would be. Ebba let him struggle for a minute or two. Then she quietly stopped him.

"You'd better let me say it, Art."

"B-bb-b - but w-wait! I w-want t-tt-to."

"I know. So let's just save time. I'll answer your question before you ask it, just to prove we're both on the same team. The answer is 'yes'."

Art says, "You see-how He took me off the hook on that one?"

GOD had done a great deal for Art Petznick, but the old handicap was still there. Art couldn't say three words without stammering. His Bible studies were completed, he had a head full of sermons, but his rebellious tongue made him helpless.

Then a classmate asked Art to preach in a little Polish church. And Art Petznick, the man who couldn't even carry on a conversation, said, "Wh-why, sure!"

Later, he wondered if the years of bad whiskey and canned heat had affected his brain. He went to his room and prayed as he had never prayed before. This was the "agonizing prayer" that rises from only our deepest needs.

As Art begged for help from above, it seemed to him the Lord answered, "Art, if I could save your soul, I can loosen your tongue . . ."

Real peace poured over him, and he opened his Bible and started preparing his sermon. He chose the text in the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah that speaks of JESUS. **"All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all."**

The night he was to preach, Art knew he had a well-prepared sermon. But during the introduction, he thought seriously of running up the aisle and out the door. Instead, a moment later, he found himself standing at the pulpit.

He opened his mouth - and nothing came out. He wanted to thank the friend who had introduced him, but remembered that "th" sounds had always thrown him. Then he remembered that all words threw him.

He was so confused that even the text left his mind. He stood staring down at Ebba, his new wife, in the third row.

Seconds ticked away and all he could do was say in his mind, over and over again, "JESUS - JESUS - JESUS!"

Again he opened his mouth. Slowly, very slowly at first, words began to flow.

"I've decided - to use as my text this evening - the sixth verse of the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah . . ."

He was hesitant, but every trace of stammering had vanished. And as Art gained confidence in the reality of the miracle, his sermon flowed more and more smoothly. At times it was actually eloquent.

Ebba was the first person to reach him after the service. "Art, darling - you were wonderful!"

"But - Ebba, I still don't believe it."

"You just stood up there and - and talked!"

He had a sudden thought.

"Maybe - maybe it was just that once. I only asked for the Lord's help for tonight. Maybe I'll start stammering again."

"No, Art. Our Lord doesn't do anything in half-way measures. Go on - talk! Talk a blue streak!"

Art Petznick's tongue had been loosened. The speech impediment never returned. But even this didn't make life a soft bed of roses. CHRIST wants durable followers who can keep going in the tough places. He said as much when He sent Ananias to find Paul with the words, "**... I will show him how great things he must suffer for my name's sake.**"

Art was offered a full-time pastorate in Glenwood, Illinois. The salary was three dollars and fifty cents a week.

He and Ebba prayed all one night about it. It was Ebba who brought the prayer session to a close.

"Now, Lord," she prayed, "We both know you want us to take that pastorate. We've just been shying away from that ridiculous salary. But now we're ready to obey. You promised You'd take care of our needs if we seek You and Your kingdom first. So, Lord - here we go - for three dollars and fifty cents, plus all the '**riches in Christ Jesus**'."

It was a brave decision, but it still had to be tested. They were actually unpacking their few belongings in Glenwood when a letter arrived. It offered a pastorate in Omaha at \$125 a month plus a parsonage.

The new offer sounded wonderful. But Ebba said, "Wait a minute, Art. We'd better ask the Lord about this."

So down on their knees they went. And there amid the packing cases and excelsior they knew that GOD was asking them to stay in Glenwood. They wrote a letter declining the Omaha offer and went back to unpacking.

One of the first problems in their "three-fifty" pastorate had to do with fund raising. Some of the ladies of the church insisted on holding a bazaar in the church basement. To Art, this just didn't seem like GOD's way. He stood firm in his position that GOD would provide anything that was in His will. All Art got was argument.

Ebba had her usual answer. "Down on your knees, honey."

"What?"

"Right now, before I go to the ladies' meeting. You didn't get anywhere with them, so let's ask Him to fix it. Bazaars may not be wrong, but I think they're unnecessary. Let's give the question to GOD."

Three hours later, Art watched Ebba coming up the walk from the ladies' meeting in a torrential downpour of rain. She was laughing as she closed the door and hung up her raincoat to dry.

"Art, He's done it again! The fountains at the great deep (were) broken up, and the windows of heaven were opened!"

"It's a deluge, all right. But what are you so happy about?"

"He's answered another prayer. The bazaar is off!"

"What? How come?"

"The waters of the flood were upon the earth - and they left a lake in the church basement. So the ladies very wisely took that as a sign from GOD that you were right and they were wrong."

The question of bazaars never came up again. Nor did the church close for lack of money. Instead, the congregation outgrew the old building, and within two years had built and paid for a larger one. What's more, the pastor's salary went up to a princely fifteen dollars - every week.

At "recession" prices, Art and Ebba were just able to make ends meet. But when their two children came along, they desperately needed a washing machine. When they had talked it all over Ebba said, "Down on your knees, honey."

"On the subject of a washing machine?"

"Yes - on the subject of a washing machine."

They knew the washer was far beyond their reach, but well within GOD's.

Several days later Art came home from a round of calls to find a beautiful, brand-new washing machine standing in the kitchen. Neither he nor Ebba had ordered it, so he phoned the store to report a mistaken delivery. The manager assured him it had gone to the right place.

"But, who sent it to us?"

"Sorry. The customer requested that his name be withheld."

It's no wonder that when their family outgrew the tiny house, they asked GOD for help. But they didn't keep fretting about it. They simply laid the problem before Him, left it with Him, and forgot all about it.

Art says, "If you keep worrying over your needs and snatching your problems back from GOD, you can tie even His hands."

So, the housing problem was solved, too. An old lady came to the Petznicks with her settled decision.

"I've been a member of this church all my married life, and I haven't long to live. But I do have money and a vacant lot. You give the orders, and I'll build a house on that lot to fit your needs . . . No - don't give me any backtalk! The Lord told me to do this. I'm too old to start disobeying Him now!"

And the house was built.

Art and Ebba have a much bigger church now, in Phoenix, Arizona. But they're just the same, and they know their Lord never changes. Art makes a very sound observation.

He says, "We have to work as though everything depended upon us, and pray as though everything depended upon - GOD!"

~ end of chapter 9 ~

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